

## **Do Cultural Beliefs Prevent the Navajo from using Vehicular Seat Belts in the Chinle Service Unit? Woody Begay, Class of 1989.**

### **ABSTRACT**

The Navajo Nation has had a seat belt law since 1987, but the seat belt use rate in the Chinle Service Unit is low. It was suggested that the low seat belt use rate was due to Navajo cultural beliefs. 252 Navajo drivers were surveyed to determine if they believe seat belts and child restraints are beneficial and to see if their decisions not to wear seat belts were due to their native belief. The majority of the participants believe seat belts and child restraints are beneficial and that inherent native beliefs were not the primary factors for low seat belt use.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Navajo Nation is located in northern New Mexico and Arizona and southern Utah. With a land mass larger than the state of West Virginia, the Navajo Nation is the largest Reservation in the United States. The Chinle Service Unit is a service area established by the Navajo Area Indian Health Service (IHS).

The Navajo Nation had one of the lowest seat belt use rates in the country, about 14 percent.<sup>1</sup> Injuries are the most serious health problem facing the Navajo Nation and are the leading cause of death among the Navajo. Motor vehicle crash injuries are the single most important component of the severe injuries on the Navajo Nation. The average motor vehicle death rate from 1982 to 1984 was 88.3 per 100,000 population.<sup>2</sup> This is about 3.5 times the national motor vehicle death rate in 1980 of 25 per 100,000 population for all races.<sup>3</sup>

The impact of all injuries, especially motor vehicle injuries, is an obvious health concern of the Navajo people and the Indian Health Service. Only limited studies have been performed on the cultural aspects of injury prevention among the Navajo people.

Native beliefs have been perceived as a stumbling block to preventive measures for motor vehicle injuries, especially with regards to seat belt use. To please the Holy Ones, the Navajo pray and sing, asking for protection in their daily lives. The Navajo ask the Holy Ones, through their songs and prayers, to allow them to Walk and Travel in Beauty.<sup>4</sup> To walk and Travel in Beauty means to flood the mind with positive thoughts and thus to live a good and healthy life. Having negative thoughts places the thought in the person's path of life and the person will sooner or later run into the negative thought. Negative thoughts can result in spiritual illness (mental disturbance) or physical harm, such as an injury.

It has been suggested that Navajo people believe wearing a seat belt meant having negative thoughts about being in a motor vehicle crash. By having this negative thought, the person was asking for a mishap while traveling.

The purpose of this study was to determine if Navajo people believe passenger restraints are beneficial and reduce injuries. In addition, the study was to determine if the cultural beliefs of the Navajo people are a primary influence on whether or not the Navajo people use seat belts and child restraints.

### **METHODS**

The study group for this cross-sectional study were drivers observed at specific locations in the Chinle Service Unit. Questionnaires were administered to elicit responses regarding the participants beliefs about passenger restraint use. The Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of Arizona,<sup>5</sup> was consulted regarding design of questions to get human behavioral information. A questionnaire was then developed based on background information obtained from interviews with medicine men, community people, health care workers and native cultural instructors. The draft questionnaire was reviewed and revised by the Navajo community health workers for clarity and proper translation into the Navajo language. The questionnaire was pre-tested on 50 Navajo people and then revised and finalized using the comments from the pre-tested group.

The basic information obtained from the questionnaire included the age and sex of participants, whether they lived in a community or in a rural location, the type of vehicle they drive, and how often they drive. The participants were also asked to provide comments on seat belt use and native beliefs. The questionnaire was administered by health care workers and a Navajo Tribal employee who were fluent in both English and Navajo. The people who administered the questionnaire were given specific instructions on the Navajo translation of the questions so that each administrator would ask the questions the same way in Navajo.

Three sites were selected in the study area to administer the questionnaire: a trading post, a shopping center and a gas station. Randomly selected drivers who stopped at the three sites and who were not wearing seat belts were

interviewed. If more than one person was in the vehicle, then only the driver was interviewed. Each question was asked in English and Navajo, basically in the same manner.

Computer entry of the data was done using the Epi Info 5.0 software.

## RESULTS

There were 252 questionnaires completed during this study. Table 1 presents the age and sex distribution of the participants. There were 3 drivers identified who were under the age of 10 years. Of the total participants, 102 lived in an isolated area while 137 lived in a central community. The majority of participants (88%) used a vehicle daily. About 14 percent of the females reportedly used a vehicle less than daily, compared to 11 percent of the males.

The responses to the seven questions on the benefits of restraint use and on native beliefs are presented in Table 2.

## DISCUSSION

The majority of the participants agreed that seat belts and child restraints are beneficial and reduce injuries. This was true regardless of the participant's age group. The majority of participants in all age groups agreed that seat belts are beneficial, reduce injuries and save lives and that child restraints should be used. The age group that disagreed with these statements most frequently were the older participants, over the age of 60 years.

The reason for not using restraints was not native beliefs for the majority of the participants. As might be expected there were variations on questions concerning native beliefs and the use of restraints based on the age of the participants. More than any other age group, older Navajos, who may have a better understanding and knowledge of traditional beliefs, agreed that not using a seat belt was due to their native beliefs. Equal proportions of the older Navajos agreed and disagreed that their native songs and prayers protected them so they did not need to use a seat belt. Navajos under the age of 30 years tended to agree that placing a child in a restraint is asking for a mishap while traveling. People over the age of 30 disagreed with this statement. Navajos over the age of 60 years tended to disagree that placing a child in a restraint is either asking for a mishap or defeats their native prayers and songs.

The fact that participants under the age of 30 agreed that placing a child in a restraint is asking for a mishap, but disagreed that placing a child in a restraint defeats their native songs and prayers, may indicate either a poor question design or perhaps a lack of understanding and knowledge of traditional beliefs.

Some participants felt that using a seat belt is a precautionary measure meant to preserve life and health. Using vehicular seat belts and observing the native songs and prayers are both measures intended to sustain life and good health and, therefore, wearing seat belts and native beliefs go hand in hand. There were others who felt that native beliefs have nothing to do with restraint use. Nowhere in the Navajo teaching or in the development of the prayers and songs were seat belts mentioned. Inhibitions based on the traditional beliefs are not the primary reason for not using seat belts or child restraints. The reasons given by many of the participants for not using seat belts or child restraints were convenience and the perception of danger.

The most common vehicle type used by Navajo families living in rural areas is the pick-up truck. In this study, 74 percent of the drivers were operating pick-up trucks. Many times the cab of the truck is filled with four or more people. Using seat belts is inconvenient and using child safety seats almost impossible when the cabs are filled. The alternative would be to have people ride in the back of the pickup truck which is also a dangerous practice.

Many of the drivers stated they were driving only short distances and did not need to wear seat belts on these short trips. Participants perceived that the dangers of crashes and other mishaps are greater on longer trips than short trips. Also the potential for getting caught not wearing the seat belt and receiving a ticket are greater on long trips.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the majority of the people interviewed agreed that safety-restraint use is good and beneficial, none of the participants were observed using seat belts at the time of the interview. For the majority of the participants, native beliefs are not the reason they don't use seat belts or child restraints for their children. The most frequent reasons for not using restraints were inconvenience and lack of perceived dangers from either mishaps or getting a ticket for not using restraints.

The following recommendations are based on this study and are intended to increase seat belt and child restraint use in the Chinle Service Unit:

1. Provide information on the hazards of motor vehicle travel even for short trips. Any training or information should be designed and presented in a positive manner and with an understanding of native beliefs;
2. Increase law enforcement activities in the communities and rural areas;
3. Listen to the Navajo people at different levels and in different organizations to learn where they are in respect to acceptance of seat belt usage. Training materials and lesson plans should be tailored to their needs.

#### **REFERENCES:**

1. Navajo Area Indian Health Service, Office of Environmental Health and Engineering, Navajo Nation Seat Belt Use, 1989, Unpublished Data.
2. Navajo Area Indian Health Service, Office of Environmental Health and Engineering, Navajo Nation Injury Morbidity and Mortality Report, 1989,
3. Baker, S. P., et. al., The Injury Fact Book. D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1984.
4. Chee, Amos, Native American Church Roadman, Rough Rock, Arizona. February, 1989.
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**Table 1: Age and Sex of Participants**

<u>Age group</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Total</u>
0-9	3	0	3
10-19	11	10	21
20-29	35	37	72
30-39	36	36	72
40-49	24	25	49
50-59	11	12	23
60-69	3	9	12
TOTAL	123	129	252

**Table 2: Responses to Selected Questions**

	Strongly <u>Agree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Maybe</u>	Strongly <u>Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>
Seat belt use is good	214	16	15	1	5
Seat belts save lives	202	20	20	1	9
Children should be in seat restraints while traveling	215	10	15	3	8
Putting a child in a seat restraint is asking for a mishap	88	15	34	9	103
Not wearing seat belt due to “my native believe”	32	10	40	13	157
Putting children in restraints defeats prayers and songs	37	9	34	16	154
No need for a seat belt due to protection of my native songs and prayers	36	4	41	16	155